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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 15 Sept 2024 Revised: 10 Oct 2024 Accepted: 20 Oct 2024 Published: 1 Nov 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Transition Programs Students with Special Needs Special Education</p> <p></p>	<p>Transitioning from school to adulthood presents significant hurdles for students with special needs, especially when it comes to finding independent living and work. Many students with special needs still find it difficult to adjust, even with the help of specialist programs and legal frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The success of current transition programs is assessed in this systematic literature review (SLR), which also identifies the factors that support and impede successful post-school outcomes. The study examines research that were published between 2020 and 2024 using the PRISMA approach. The results underscore the significance of career guidance, skill-building initiatives, and therapeutic therapies in augmenting the employment opportunities available to students with special needs. Still, there are still many major challenges to overcome, including uneven application of evidence-based approaches, regional differences, and low parental participation. The analysis ends with suggestions for creating more individualized transition plans, enhancing parental involvement, and facilitating better access to technology tools. In order to better address the academic and vocational needs of students, future research should concentrate on improving curriculum in transition programs. Additionally, collaborative collaboration between educators, employers, and parents should be encouraged to ensure the holistic success of students.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from school to adulthood can be difficult for students with special needs in many ways, especially when it comes to finding long-term employment. Many of these students feel worried about their future prospects because traditional educational frameworks frequently fail to provide them with the skills they need to succeed in higher education. Many students still struggle to effectively navigate this crucial period of change, even in the face of numerous institutional supports, legislative initiatives such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and customized transition programs designed to assist students with disabilities. Adapted and customized programs continue to be vitally important since without them, these people have poor outcomes for independent living and jobs after high school (Shaffeei et al., 2020).

Studies show that transition programs can improve post-school results for students with special needs. For instance, it has been demonstrated that video-based interventions can help transition-age youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) obtain employable abilities by teaching them vocational skills (Chen & Yakubova, 2023). Furthermore, studies highlight how crucial it is to give special needs students vocational training and particular job components in order to facilitate a seamless transition into employment (Pit et al., 2023). Success in internships and ensuing employment also depends on addressing certain issues including getting ready for the workforce and adjusting to new surroundings (Schroeder et al., 2023).

The purpose of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to evaluate the success of the transition programs that are currently in place for students with special needs, to pinpoint the obstacles and triggers that prevent positive post-school outcomes, and to offer evidence-based suggestions for enhancing these programs. The review uses the PRISMA methodology to provide a thorough and rigorous analysis of the literature, with an emphasis on research published between 2020 and 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review about the post-school employment outcomes for students with special needs and barriers and facilitators in transition to postsecondary education and employment.

POST-SCHOOL EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Educational and vocational research has placed a great deal of emphasis on the post-school job outcomes for students with special needs, in part because of the particular difficulties these students have in finding competitive employment. Research keeps emphasizing how crucial early work experiences and customized transition plans are to enhancing these results. After high school, there is a greater chance of successful employment for disabled students who take use of community-based employment options. These work experiences impart valuable skills that are necessary for success in the workforce, such as communication, teamwork, and time management. Furthermore, customized transition programs that center on a student's interests, strengths, and career objectives have been shown to be successful in assisting students in becoming ready for work after graduation (Sun & Ho, 2023).

Another essential component in enhancing the career opportunities of students with special needs is vocational training. Students who enroll in programs that offer practical, career-specific training might acquire transferable abilities that they can use right away in the workforce. Studies indicate that the inclusion of vocational education in high school curriculum improves students' employability by assisting them in gaining technical and academic skills (Pit et al., 2023). Internships and work-based learning opportunities are also frequently included in vocational training, giving students the chance to obtain practical experience in the disciplines they have chosen. Students with special needs become more competitive in the job market as a result of these experiences, which assist close the gap between education and the working world.

The job results of students with special needs are significantly influenced by the involvement of families and communities. There is a greater chance of success for children in the workforce if family members actively participate in their child's transition planning and have high expectations for employment. Apart from parental

engagement, community collaborations with nearby enterprises and vocational rehabilitation programs offer students increased accessibility to job prospects and networks of support. Schools that cultivate these connections can provide more inclusive job experiences for students with special needs, which are critical for helping them acquire the skills needed for long-term employment (Choiseul-Praslin & McConnell, 2020).

Overall, for students with special needs, early work experience, specialized occupational training, and active family and community involvement are all important components that lead to successful post-school employment outcomes.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS IN TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

There are many obstacles facing students with special needs as they move into higher education and the workforce. One major issue is the different implementation of evidence-based practices in different educational settings, which leads to different results. When educational facilities neglect to furnish sufficient support, students find themselves inadequately equipped for the demands of postsecondary life (Alverson et al., 2019).

Geographical inequities further exacerbate the accessibility of transition programs for students residing in rural locales, owing to a scarcity of resources. This disparity in access frequently culminates in rural students receiving a less thorough level of support as they navigate their transition to higher education (Lipka et al., 2020). Furthermore, transition initiatives that target prevalent obstacles, such as social isolation, have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing students' social and academic integration during their progression into postsecondary education (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2020).

Parental engagement constitutes another pivotal element in the enhancement of educational outcomes. The active involvement of parents in the transition planning process fosters improved support and more tailored programs for students, yet many parents lack the requisite knowledge to engage comprehensively (Almalki et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The Systematic Literature Review process is carried out using the PRISMA Framework, which involves rigorous review through three main phases described in subsections 2.1 Identification, 2.2 Screening, and 2.3 Eligibility. At the end of the data formulation, 2.4 Data Abstraction and Analysis describes the PRISMA Framework-based review.

Identification

To acquire relevant research for this topic, the systematic review follows three basic steps. The first stage is to identify keywords and search for phrases that are similar to or synonymous with them in thesauri, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and past academic papers. After identifying all relevant keywords, search strings were developed to query the Scopus and WoS databases, as shown in Table 1. For this initial phase of the systematic review, 92 academic papers that were chosen from both databases were successfully collected.

Table 1

Search String

Database	Search String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("transition program" OR "transition services" OR "school-to-work transition" OR "career transition" OR "post-school transition") AND ("special need students" OR "students with disabilities" OR "students with special needs" OR "learners with exceptional" OR "students with learning disabilities" OR "students with additional needs") AND ("support services" OR "educational support" OR "accommodation" OR "individualized education program" OR "IEP" OR "assistive services" OR "inclusion program"))
WoS	("transition program" OR "transition services" OR "school-to-work transition" OR "career transition" OR "post-school transition") AND ("special need students" OR "students with

disabilities" OR "students with special needs" OR "learners with exceptionalities" OR "students with learning disabilities" OR "students with additional needs") AND ("support services" OR "educational support" OR "accommodation" OR "individualized education program" OR "IEP" OR "assistive services" OR "inclusion program") (Topic)

Screening

Repetitive papers were eliminated in the first screening stage, leaving out two articles. As a result, 81 publications were evaluated during the second screening step using a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria that academics had developed. The nature of the literature was the main criterion used, with research papers being the primary source of useful insights. This also included excluding reviews, systematic reviews, novels, book series, meta-analyses, meta-syntheses, and book chapters that did not correspond with the most recent research. It is important to note that this selection procedure was restricted to works published in the English language and concentrated on the previous five years, from 2020 to 2024. Eleven publications were eliminated based on these specific standards.

Eligibility

During the third stage, which is known as eligibility assessment, 9 articles were gathered. To ensure that these papers fulfilled the inclusion requirements and complemented the current study goals, a thorough assessment of their titles and core contents was conducted. As a result, 1 publications that did not fulfill the evaluation criteria such as not unrelated to the subject area. In conclusion, Table 2 lists 8 articles that are available for review.

Table 2

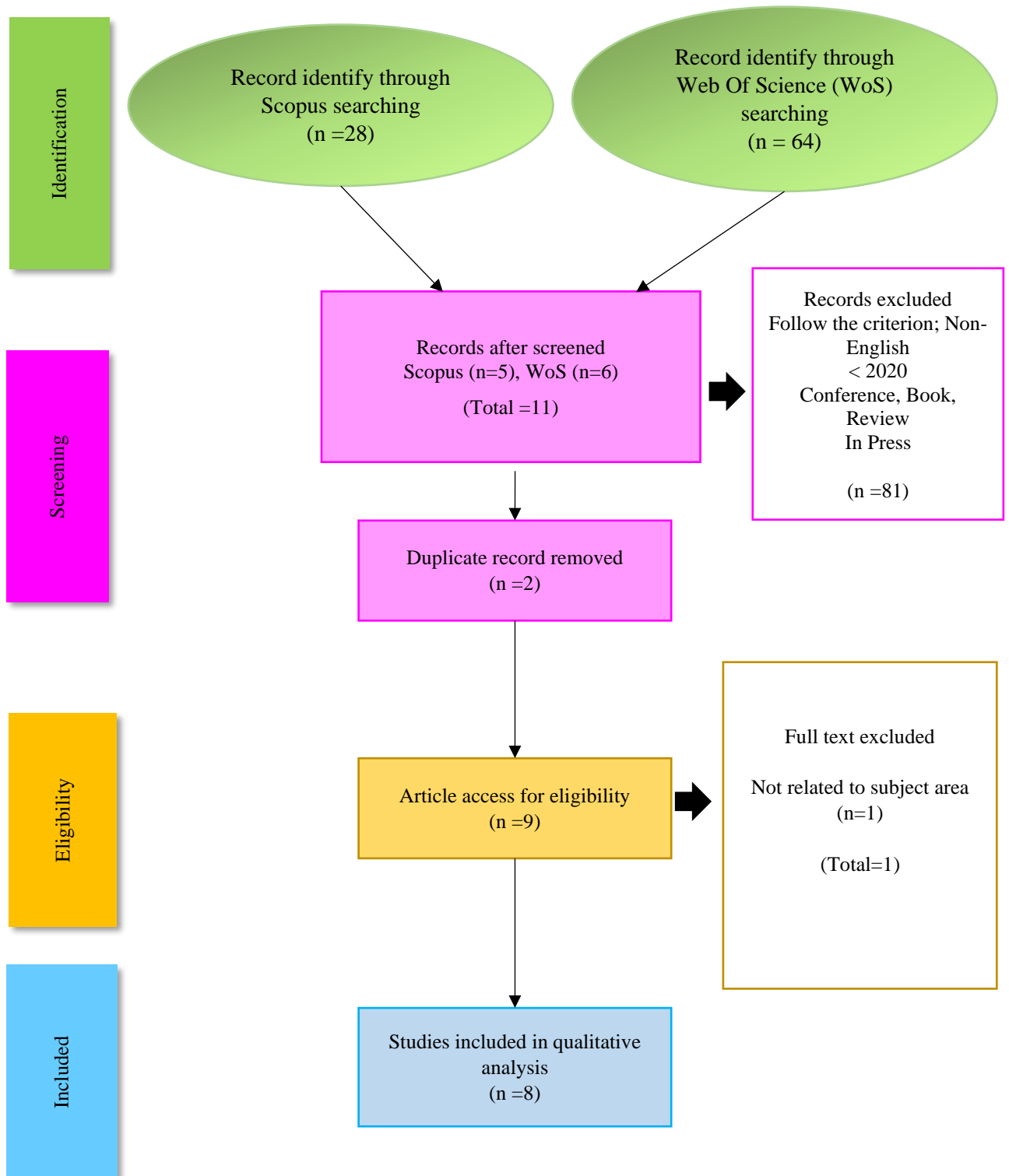
The selection criterion of searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020-2024	< 2020
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference Proceedings, Book chapters, Book Series, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis strategy was utilized in this study to combine various research methodologies, including mixed, qualitative, and quantitative methods. Finding pertinent subjects and subtopics on the Transition Program for kids with special needs was the main goal. In order to gather data, eight papers had to be carefully reviewed in order to extract relevant material for the study's topics. Through the authors' collaborative efforts, three primary themes arose: "Post-School Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Disabilities," "Postsecondary Transition Barriers and Facilitators," and "Role of Educators and Support Staff in Transition Planning." These themes were further developed along with related themes and ideas. Throughout the data analysis process, a thorough record was regularly maintained to document analyses, findings, questions, and other relevant information. In order to guarantee the consistency of the ideas, the writers also had conversations to resolve any discrepancies that arose during the topic development process. In order to ensure domain validity, the analysis was examined by specialists in Special Education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), who also verified that each sub-theme was appropriate, significant, and clear. During the expert review process, the analysis was refined to improve the study's validity and reliability by adding professional judgments and feedback. The procedure used to implement the PRISMA Framework is described in Figure 1:

Figure 1 : Adapt from Moher et al. (2009)



RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Post-School Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Disabilities

The reviewed studies provide valuable insights into the multifaceted strategies needed to improve post-school employment outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly emphasizing the importance of both structured skill-building and personalized learning experiences. Clark et al. (2024) focus on the effectiveness of the UPGRADE Your Performance intervention, a multicomponent approach designed to enhance soft skills critical for workplace success. Their findings demonstrate that targeted instruction in areas such as self-evaluation, goal setting, and self-graphing not only leads to improvements in these specific skills but also facilitates the generalization of these skills to non-targeted areas. This generalization is crucial because it indicates that students are capable of applying the strategies they have learned in contexts beyond the immediate focus of the intervention, which is particularly important in the unpredictable environments they are likely to encounter in the workplace. The ability to transfer soft skills across contexts suggests that programs like UPGRADE Your Performance have the potential to equip students with flexible, adaptive strategies that are essential for long-term employment success, making these programs a critical component of transition services.

In parallel, Gatto et al. (2021) emphasize the need for personalized approaches to transition programs, showing that students' participation rates and perceptions of these programs vary significantly depending on their disability type. This study highlights that a one-size-fits-all approach to transition programs is insufficient for meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Instead, tailored interventions that consider the specific challenges associated with different disability types can lead to better engagement and more favorable employment outcomes. For example, students with cognitive disabilities may require more structured supports and accommodations than those with physical disabilities, who might face different barriers, such as physical access to workplaces or specific task modifications. By customizing transition programs experiences to align with the unique needs of each student, educators and employers can foster a more inclusive learning environment that supports the development of both job-specific and generalizable skills.

The synthesis of these studies suggests that a dual approach combining structured skill-building interventions with tailored work-based learning opportunities may offer the most comprehensive support for students with disabilities as they transition from school to work. Clark et al. (2023) demonstrate that multicomponent interventions are effective not only in building critical soft skills but also in helping students generalize these skills to broader contexts, an essential quality for adaptability in dynamic work environments. Meanwhile, Gatto et al. (2023) underscore the importance of customizing transition programs to address the distinct needs of students based on their disability types, enhancing both participation and skill acquisition. The article summary for theme 1 is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme 1: Post-School Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Disabilities

Authors	Title	Finding
Clark, Kelly A.; Konrad, Moira; Test, David W.	The effects of UPGRADE your performance on employment soft skills of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A pilot study of generalization	The study found that the UPGRADE Your Performance program effectively improved soft skills in students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The findings suggest that this program could be valuable for teaching soft skills and highlight the need for further research to explore its overall effectiveness.
Gatto L.E.; Pearce H.; Plesca M.; Antonie L.	Students with disabilities: Relationship between participation rates and perceptions of work-integrated learning by disability type	Students' participation rates and perceptions of work-integrated learning vary by disability type, and tailored programs improve employment outcomes.

Postsecondary Transition Barriers and Facilitators

The theme of Postsecondary Transition Barriers and Facilitators underscores the challenges and supports necessary for students with disabilities as they transition from secondary education to postsecondary life, including higher education and employment. The reviewed studies provide insights into systemic barriers, institutional supports, and the role of various stakeholders. Hu & Lin (2023) highlight the importance of structured workplace accommodations for college students with intellectual disabilities, showing that such accommodations are essential for long-term employment success. Without these accommodations, students struggle to adapt to work environments, indicating that collaboration between educational institutions and employers is crucial for a smooth transition. Doty et al. (2020) emphasize the need for consistent implementation of evidence-based secondary transition practices. While such practices are known to improve employment outcomes, their inconsistent application across schools creates gaps in services. This highlights the necessity of standardizing transition models to ensure every student benefits from effective practices.

Ookeditse et al. (2024) focus on the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities in rural regions, particularly in Botswana, where limited infrastructure and inadequate support systems exacerbate transition barriers. The geographic disparity in access to resources necessitates systemic improvements, especially in underserved areas. Brown et al. (2023) stress the critical role that school leadership plays in advocating for and implementing transition services. Principals and assistant principals are key in securing resources and providing teacher training, yet a lack of sufficient support remains a significant barrier to the success of these programs. Finally, Azizah et al. (2024) highlight the role of parents in postsecondary transition planning. Parental involvement, particularly in skill-building and transition activities, is crucial for ensuring successful outcomes, making parents essential partners in the transition process.

Together, these studies illustrate that successful postsecondary transitions for students with disabilities require a multifaceted approach. Structured accommodations, consistent application of evidence-based practices, attention to geographic disparities, strong leadership support, and active parental involvement are all critical facilitators of positive outcomes. However, the presence of systemic barriers such as inconsistent implementation, lack of resources, and geographic inequalities underscores the need for targeted efforts to improve transition services for students with disabilities. By addressing these barriers and strengthening collaboration among educators, administrators, parents, and employers, transition programs can better support students with disabilities in achieving long-term success in postsecondary education and employment. Table 4 shows the article summary for theme 2.

Table 4
 Theme 2: Postsecondary Transition Barriers and Facilitators

Authors	Title	Finding
Hu, Shin-Tzu; Lin, Yi-Ting	Academic and Workplace Transition for College Students With Intellectual Disabilities: An Exploratory Study	College students with disabilities face challenges in transitioning to the workplace, and structured workplace accommodations are essential for long-term success.
Doty, Antonette; Ray, Laurie; Clark, Kelly; Bethune, Lauren; Test, David	Evidence-Based Secondary Transition Predictors for Physical Therapists Working With High School Students	Evidence-based predictors for employment success include the integration of secondary transition practices, but inconsistent implementation is a major barrier.

Ookeditse, Goitse B.; Habulezi, Joseph; Batsalelwang, Kefilwe J. P.; Molemane, Neo J.	Postsecondary transition barriers for students with disabilities in two neighboring school regions in Botswana	Barriers to postsecondary transition for students with disabilities in rural settings include limited infrastructure and support systems, with systemic changes needed.
Brown D.; Plotner A.J.; Marshall K.J.	Principal and Assistant Principal Involvement in and Barriers to Supporting Secondary Transition for Students with Disabilities	School leadership plays a critical role in the successful implementation of transition services, particularly when advocating for resources and teacher training.
Azizah, Nur; Diniarti, Gena; Umar, Veroyunita; Suharmini, Tin	The Role of Parents in Implementing the Post-School Transition	Parental involvement in postsecondary planning is a major facilitator of transition success, and parents' engagement in skill-building activities is crucial.

Role of Educators and Support Staff in Transition Planning

The theme of Role of Educators and Support Staff in Transition Planning emphasizes the critical role that educators, families, and support staff play in creating effective transition plans for students with disabilities. The study by (Griffiths et al., 2021) explores the development of strong transition-focused Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are informed by labor market data. This collaboration between educators, families, and specialists is essential for ensuring that students with disabilities are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve better post-school outcomes, such as securing employment or pursuing higher education. By aligning IEP goals with current labor market demands, educators can help students build relevant skills that improve their chances of success in the workforce.

One of the key findings of the study is that collaborative planning, involving input from families and specialists, strengthens the IEP process, making it more tailored to each student's unique needs and future aspirations. This approach ensures that transition goals are realistic, meaningful, and achievable. The involvement of a multidisciplinary team in the transition process provides a well-rounded perspective on the student's strengths, areas for improvement, and potential career paths. Furthermore, by using labor market data, educators can guide students towards industries and careers where opportunities are available, helping to close the gap between education and employment for students with disabilities. The article summary for theme 3 is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5
Theme 3: Role of Educators and Support Staff in Transition Planning

Authors	Title	Finding
Griffiths, Amy Jane; Cosier, Meghan E.; Wieg, Rachel; Mathur, Sneha Kohli; Morgan, Sara	Developing strong transition-focused IEPS using labour market data	Developing strong transition-focused IEPs with collaboration from educators, families, and specialists leads to better post-school outcomes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The significance of transition programs in enhancing post-school employment opportunities and facilitating the transfer of students with special needs to postsecondary education has been highlighted by this systematic literature review (SLR). The analysis shows that in order to adequately prepare students with disabilities for the workforce, systematic interventions are necessary, such as skill-building programs and vocational training.

However, there are many of obstacles. The efficacy of transition programs is limited by institutions' inconsistent application of evidence-based procedures, and access to services is hampered by geographic differences, especially in rural areas. Despite its importance, parental involvement is frequently impeded by a lack of resources and awareness, which makes the transition process much more difficult. It is advised that schools create specialized transition programs that are suited to the various requirements of kids with disabilities in order to solve these issues. Other essential actions for achieving better results include standardizing evidence-based procedures, increasing parental involvement, and extending resource access through technology.

The focus on studies from 2020 to 2024 may have excluded relevant earlier research, and the review's concentrate on English-language publications may have limited its global reach. These are just two of the review's drawbacks. Despite these drawbacks, the results highlight the necessity of continual efforts to improve and broaden transition programs. Through the implementation of suggested techniques and the resolution of current issues, educational institutions can enhance their ability to assist students with disabilities in succeeding in both employment and postsecondary education.

Future research should focus on improving the curriculum of transition programs to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. Studies should explore how the curriculum can be tailored to enhance both academic and vocational skills, preparing students more effectively for the workforce and higher education. Collaborative curriculum development that involves educators, employers, and parents should also be examined to create a more comprehensive approach to student success.

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